

[ocean shoreline sounds]

I'm John Faris, and this is My Life, Wildlife. [Ship horn sound] I'm the captain of the Tiglax, which is a research vessel for Fish and Wildlife Service. I'm based here in Homer, Alaska, all part of Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge. I grew up in the Midwest, I grew up in Ohio. I've always had nature, you know, from when I was a young kid in my life. Both my parents were teachers. So we had summers off. So we didn't, we always went on vacation, but we didn't do the standard Midwest vacation that you go to Myrtle Beach and everybody get a hotel room. We pile everybody in the station wagon, tow a tent camper, and we'd had up to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan or Canada, or Maine, or the Appalachian Mountains and go backpacking and you know, do that kind of stuff. So I just kept doing it all and then, you know, college, I got to a point where every semester I was changing my major. They finally started saying, well, you got to stick with one you got to make a decision on what you want to be. And I was like, You mean like, what I want to be doing life now? And they're like, Yeah. I was like, Okay, I want to be out of here. I do not want to be, was like I don't want to be here I want to be outdoors active and that was the beginning of I guess how I got here.

I headed west to Montana, to ski season with my older brother who's living out there, still lives out there. You know, I was like 20 years old. I had college roommates come by, they drove by on their way going to Alaska to work for the summer. I had to make a decision to leave and one day they stayed the night and I left the next morning. So we road tripped up the Alcan through Canada, you know, camping every night, you know, fish in here fish in their playing. I remember pulling into Anchorage after the road trip and it was just you know, Anchorage had this frontier town aspect of it, it was the end of the pipeline days kind of bars are open till three or four in the morning you'd come out and sun would be up or the daylight would be coming so it was I was like wow, it just never stops and it was the land of freedom and camping and Midnight Sun and I just really never looked back. I started working boats, working construction. I fished salmon. I fished halibut, black Cod. I fish crab. A previous captain was a friend. He offered me the "hey, we need a skiff man or deckhand" I was like go do a season. I didn't know what I was really getting into. I'm fairly adventuresome. So I was ready to turn the page a little bit. So I took the opportunity and was there fill in guy for the first season and so it was a whole different environment. The conversations were about science and what we saw today, what we did today, what we learned and it just it I really enjoyed it. I love the outdoors. I love the wilderness. I love the science. I love being so hands on. It's so amazing what I've gotten to do. I've I've handled sea lion pups, I've been in nest with eagles chicks while the parents are kind of dive bombing you as we wait them up. I've watched killer whales, I literally watched killer whales train their young with a first year where they would throw the first seal up in the air, get the first seal to where it was totally incoherent, and then push it around and let the young try to do the attack and come in for the kill. I mean, that went on for like a half hour it was it was a really amazing sight.

I mean, I've just seen so much. It's like watching whales breach. It happens all the time. You know, in one of those cavities, how things are it's like, I come to Homer, I get my break in the middle of summer and I have a skiff and all that. I'll be running across the bay with my wife and friends and all of a sudden they see a whale blow. And they're like, oh, there's a whale over there! There's a whale over there! I kind of like, look at it like okay, and I just keep going and I'm like, stop. These people don't get to see this all the time. They want to see the whale, you know where I can just look at and say, Oh, it's just a

humpback, blah, blah and off I go. So I'm spoiled is the way I put it. I mean, I've been doing this for 20 years now. I've gone from being the guy in the skiff to being the guy that the first mate working the night shift to now being the captain. The RV Tiglax, it's 120 feet, 405 tons, which makes it pretty heavy vessel. So she's a great sea boat. She handles, we take up to 14 to 16 passengers. We have a crew of six are pretty light crew. We have a chef which is most important person on the boat that keeps everybody's morale low. We have an engineer that maintains everything. And then I have myself that runs the day shift. Then I have a first mate that runs the night shift. Then we have two deckhands one that works one works with me during the days and one works at night with the first mate. There's like two labs there on the aft part of the ship with scientists doing their work. You can have volcanologist you can have geologist, of course, we'll have our bird biologists which is with our people from Alaska Maritime, mostly our bird biologists. We'll do stellar sea lion work, we'll do whale work, we'll do contaminant work, we'll work with historians, we'll work with archaeologist. If they got an "ologist" on the end of their name they're coming on board at some point.

The vessel has Oh boy, we have a we have a range of I don't know, probably 10,000 miles I've never really tested it. She can carry 35,000 gallons of fuel. So when we leave town, we usually are gone. So we're in the natick, 60 to 70 days before we come back to resupply. Got to realize to get to the end of the Aleutians from Homer, the ship travels at 10 knots, which is roughly 12 miles an hour. So you're only going to go 240 miles a day max. So to get the end Aleutians it's seven days, you know, to get to Attu. So there's a lot of traveling and you can't just say, okay, we're going to go, you're not all protected waters, as soon as you leave Homer and get about six hours out, you're exposed already. So weather, you're always watching the weather, you're watching, which direction it's coming from, where's the next storm coming? Where are you going to be three days from now, when the big storm comes? Every year we see winds 70, or more. Every year we see seas that are 20 feet. You try not to get caught out in the open for it. It's one thing if you're going to travel four hours in that and then you have protection. It's another thing if you're going to travel like say going north in the Bering Sea to the Pribilof where you're out in the open and you have no lee from the islands for 24 hours or more. So, the weather is a constant, you're always watching the weather, we get it twice a day, and we read it religiously. I got lucky, I'm spoiled. I get that, I get to do all the all the science and get paid for it. It was ideal. I never really thought about it as a career till I look in retrospect, you know, I never said I'm going to do this and I'm going to be, okay, if I be the deckhand and I step up in first mate and I'm going to be the captain. I never looked at those lines. It just they just those doors just kept opening. I will retire someday.

I'm not going to be somebody who's going to be bored with retirement. I know how to fill my life full. As I worked, over the years, I've always worked summers and my wife and I have always been in that aspect of you know, Alaska is kind of, it's real seasonal. We travel a lot. We've spent time in the jungles of South America. and up in the Andes, and all Asia has been all over the world. These days, we spend a lot of time in Africa. We have a bush rig over there. In the Kalahari desert or I'm in the jungles and we're camping and we always were just camping all the time living the wilderness. So when I retire I'll go back to doing that. A lot more traveling and still being in nature the you know, the whole time and so, when retirement comes, I'll be ready for it.

[music]

This has been My Life Wildlife, the production of the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Alaska Region, Office of External Affairs, producers Lisa Hupp and Kris Pacheco produced in story edited by David Hoffman for Citizen Racecar. Audio editing, sound design, and original music by Garrett Tiedemann. Artwork by Michelle Lawson. In Alaska, the employees of the US Fish and Wildlife Service are shared stewards of world renowned natural resources, and our nation's last true wild places. The lands and waters of this place we call home, nourish a vast and unique array of fish, wildlife and people. Our hope is that each generation has the opportunity to live with live from discover and enjoy the wildness of this awe inspiring land and the people who love and depend on it.